



CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL

**LAS POLÍTICAS DE EQUIDAD DE GÉNERO EN PROSPECTIVA:
NUEVOS ESCENARIOS, ACTORES Y ARTICULACIONES**

9 al 12 de Noviembre. Buenos Aires, Argentina
Área Género, Sociedad y Políticas - FLACSO Argentina

Localizing Human Right Norms: Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Argentina

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Al citar este artículo incluir la siguiente información: Trabajo presentado en el Congreso Internacional:
“Las políticas de equidad de género en prospectiva: nuevos escenarios, actores y articulaciones” Área
Género, Sociedad y Políticas- FLACSO – Argentina. Noviembre, 2010. Buenos Aires, Argentina

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Eje Temático: Globalización

I. Introduction

The political, social and cultural changes that have occurred in the last decades have transformed the notion of rights, expanding their meaning well beyond the sphere of civil and political entitlement. In this “age of rights” (Bobbio, 1996), the array of instruments and mechanisms available to ensure the respect of human rights accepted by the international community has expanded, and this continuously broadening set of rights has become a universal standard for global justice and a measure of the quality for most nation states. The constructive process of creating this global machinery for the protection of rights has brought about a unique opportunity for non-state actors to participate in the re-conceptualization of global justice and the creation of international local legal norms. Women’s organizations have been actively engaged in this development, both advocating and lobbying for the incorporation of women’s rights and gender justice into the political agenda. These organizations play a critical role in international forums, particularly in evidence at both the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 held in Cairo and at the Fourth Conference on Women in 1995, held in Beijing. The efforts of women’s organizations contributed to the incorporation of principles of gender equality in the international agenda, and the acknowledgment that current inequalities were the result of the direct violation of women’s rights. (Wilson and Mitchell, 2003) There is a certain consensus that in a globalized world, international legal norms based on treaties and conventions have

become a new form of “cosmopolitan legality”¹. However, the manner in which the rules and norms incrementally accepted across the globe are actually translated into local language, and how they are actively implemented and reproduced in social practices, is still a matter of much debate.

This paper explores the process of localization of international human rights norms and discourse in Argentina, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, in the context of the restoration of democracy. As Martha Finnemore and Kathleen Sikkink affirm, “*international norms must always work their influence through the filter of domestic structure and domestic norms, which can produce important variations in compliance and interpretations of these norms*” (1998, 893). This development involves political, social, legal and judicial mechanisms, and is central in the process leading to compliance with international law.

For more than three decades, Argentine feminist and women’s organizations have learned to utilize the international rights regime to secure women’s rights in the process achieving major advances in national and local legislation. Over this period of time, discrimination against women has become entrenched in national legislation and policies, and gender equality has transformed into a call for equality of opportunities and treatment. In the 2007 Gender Gap Report, Argentina demonstrated a strong performance in educational attainment and political empowerment, achieving the 33rd position on the global rankings. Conversely, the same report indicates that the wage gap for similar work between men and women continued to widen. In addition, the implementation of policies and programs aimed at decreasing gender inequalities revealed poor indicators of success.

¹ Cosmopolitanism is a multidisciplinary term that makes reference to a world without borders and the tension between the local and global. In this case it is used to indicate the undergoing transformation of the national and international legal systems underpinning the phenomenon of globalization.

(PNSSPR, 2010). In the area of sexual and reproductive health, regarded as a fundamental right, maternal mortality rate remains one of the highest in Latin America. These indicators represent just a few illustrative examples of the existing gap between what has been accomplished at the discursive level, and the actual state of affairs on the ground. They also serve to highlight the extent of the work that still needs to be done to bring to an end all forms of discrimination against women. The massive legislative transformations undergone by Argentina over the last three decades, along with the relatively small gains on the ground, comprise the baseline for exploring the process of mediating the incorporation of international human rights norms into local legislations as well as illuminating the gap between these legal commitments and its uses and practices by the state and non-state actors involved.

The case study presented in the next pages is one integral part of a larger project carried out in four countries between the years 2007 and 2009. The fieldwork carried out during that time included interviews with key state and non-state actors, participant observation of NGO meetings, and the review of reports and documents produced from the Ministry of Health and the Consortium for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, a network of activists monitoring the implementation of the National Law on sexual and reproductive rights.

II. The discourse of rights into the democratization process

During the 1980s, within a context of increasing global integration, the majority of the countries in Latin America began a process of democratization of their governments and civil societies. After a decade of dictatorship, Argentina held its first democratic election in 1983. The fall of the military regime, and the emergence of an

active and vibrant civil society, created a fertile ground for the incorporation of human rights principles and discourses into legislation and public policies. The active involvement of a great diversity of groups and organizations from civil society, and the return of hundreds of political exiles helped to consolidate a powerful and inclusive human rights movement, initiated originally to contest the violations committed by the State's terrorism. With the newly inaugurated democracy, feminist activists become organized around NGOs setting up active participation in regional and international networks of activists. The engagement in transnational groups instilled a new impulse and energy into the national women's movement. As with many other groups in the region, Argentinean women saw the importance of placing the respect of human rights and the rule of law at the core of their actions, bringing the demands for gender justice along with the efforts for the restoration of democracy and the promotion of an active and inclusive citizenship (Molyneux, 2007).

For more than two decades since the restoration of democracy, feminist groups have worked together with the wider women's movement, developing and consolidating regional and international networks, and carrying out actions and campaigns promoting the realization of women rights through bringing women's voices and claims to national, regional, and international forums.² They also developed a progressive ability to utilize the international human rights regime and to lobby for gender justice, thereby becoming a significant force behind the legal and political changes that have occurred in the country, and contributing significantly to strengthening Argentine democracy. (García y Valdivieso, 2005). The participation in transnational spaces, facilitated by the

² Some of the most notable are RSMLA (Latin American and Caribbean Women's health Network, and CLADEM (Comité de America Latina y el Caribe para la Defensa de los Derechos de la Mujer)

development of extensive information and communication technologies, has fostered the exchange of ideas with women from other regions in the global north and south, creating a ground for cross-fertilization of ideas, actions, and practices. Latin American women have continuously emphasized the links between citizenship and rights, placing their claims of sexual and reproductive rights in the context of their rights as citizens in democratic societies (Petchesky, 2000) .

One of the first achievements of the ongoing efforts of the feminist movement was the ratification of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985. As a consequence of the obligations assumed by the State, and under continuous pressure from the feminist movement, the government initiated the process that will eventually change national legislation, in order to bring the domestic norms and policies in line with the provisions established by the convention. Immediately after the ratification of CEDAW, the newly elected president, Raul Alfonsín, created a National Women's Office to secure the implementation of the convention. Eight years later, in 1991, the women's and feminist movements achieved one of the most important accomplishments when Argentina became the first country in the region to incorporate legislative measures for affirmative action, aimed at fostering increased female political participation.³ The sanction of the so called "quota law" had an immediate impact in the composition of the Lower House and the Senate, visibly

³ Two proposals of the law were simultaneously presented by the end of 1989, both counted with the support of numerous groups of women and other allies. On November 5th of 1991, women's organizations from Buenos Aires asked their constituencies to send letters to the legislators and called a demonstration at the parliament. Exceeding all expectations, women from all walks of life filled up the square located across the National Congress as well as the galleries and corridors of the building. Clapping, singing and booing the speeches they stood the sixteen hours that the debate lasted, forcing with their presence the change of position of some legislators. The Quota Law" was approved with overwhelming majority. For further description (Reynoso Nene, 1992).

increasing the participation of women in both.⁴ The strong presence of women's representation in Parliament proved to be critical in the realization of changes seeking to eliminate discriminatory measures against women in national legislation. (Allegrone, 2002) Another milestone in securing women's rights was the entrenchment of all international human rights treaties into the new constitution in 1994. And, more recently, was the sanction of the Law 26.673 that creates a National Program on Sexual and Reproductive Health, which is the main focus of this paper.⁵

Looking at the last 25 years of democratic transition, it can be said that the process has been complex, and often uneven. Having attained a massive change in legislation to incorporate measures supportive of women's rights, Argentina faces a scenario of contradictory results in which the incorporation of the language of women's rights and gender justice into domestic law have come at the expense of setbacks in other areas. Despite the sustained economic growth experienced since 2001, poverty and extreme poverty continue to affect women far more than men, particularly in the case of the youngest women, and those who are the head of a household. According to official figures, 70% of women perform unskilled jobs, and half of them work in the informal sector, receiving partial or no social benefits. (INDEC, 2010) In terms of political participation, while the Quota Law promoted a significant number of women to occupy a seat in parliament, female representation in the provincial and national supreme courts is only at 20 per cent, while women occupy only 12 per cent of the decision making

⁴ In 1991 at the time of the passing of the law, there were only 5.44% of women in the lower house; this number grew to 36% in 2006. With the renewal of the senate in 1999 the number of women in this house increased from 4.13% in that year, to 43% in 2006. (Bonder, and Neri, 1995)

⁵ Among the other significant achievements of the women and feminist movement can be mentioned law to shared paternal rights, Civil divorce, Equal opportunities more recently the Law on sexual education and to Law to prevent and eradicate Gender violence.

positions in public ministries, and political participation at the local level is only at 10 per cent (ELA, 2009).

In any case, feminist activists are in agreement that the current legal framework in Argentina expresses an existing state of compromise achieved between different actors and interests operating in the country. The legal achievements are also perceived as an opportunity for the advancement of women's rights and as a tool for the transformation of society into a renewed and more inclusive democracy.

III. Are sexual and reproductive rights human rights?

Sexual and reproductive rights have been incorporated only recently into national legislation. In 2002, overthrowing decades of conservative resistance spearheaded primarily by the Catholic Church, the National Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health was finally passed; since, 15 provincial jurisdictions have already approved legislation on covering the same matter.⁶ The National Law 25.673 established the creation of the National Program for Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation (NPSHRP). The program emphasized: a) the prevention and early detection of STDs and HIV infection, b) free and universal provision of contraceptives, c) access to information and counseling, d) the promotion of female participation in decision-making, and e) the improvement in the quality and extent of sexual and reproductive health services. This legislation was later complemented by the Law of Reproductive Surgical Decisions, which established the right of all women of legal age to choose to undergo an operation to surgically ensure contraception.⁷

⁶ National Law 25.673, approved on October, 2001. Boletín Oficial, November 22, 2002

⁷ National Law 26.130, approved on August, 2006. Boletín Oficial, August 29, 2006

This long awaited legislation granted women with access to sexual and reproductive health services. The principles that regulate the creation of the National Program also represent an important shift from a patronizing approach in medical care to a public policy based on the promotion and protection of rights. According the program's goals, women are no longer considered a "vulnerable group" in need of help but rather as citizens, entitled to rights. However, seven years after the creation of the National Program, its implementation has proved to be difficult and whereas access to contraceptive has improved in all the provinces, the inequalities among regions and ethnic groups remain high.⁸ The national rate of maternal mortality, an indicator of the quality of health services, is higher than in other similar countries in the region, and also noticeable are the significant differences within the national boundaries. For example, while the city of Buenos Aires has a rate of maternal death at 0.9 for every 10.000 births, in Formosa, a poor province in the northeast region, the figure rises to 11.5. (DEIS, 2009)

IV. Progress and challenges in the implementation of the National Program on Sexual Health and Responsible Parenting (NPSHRP)

The implementation of the National Program of sexual and reproductive health posed a number of challenges for the central administration. Argentina is a federal country divided in 24 autonomous provinces distributed in 5 geographic regions. Each Province has its own constitution and legislation, making the implementation of national laws and policies a complex and lengthy process. And, while the regulation of the national law anticipates a mechanism of interaction between jurisdictions throughout the establishment of agreements, these have proven to be difficult to put into practice due to

⁸ About 70% of maternal deaths occur in the regions with the highest levels of poverty, which means that while the risk of dying of pregnancy is around 1.8 % in the city of Buenos Aires, this number climbs to 16, 5% in the province of Jujuy, in the Northeast region, a location with a high concentration of indigenous population.

the political organization of the country and the often conflict-ridden relationships between the provincial authorities and the central government.

The political organization however, can explain some of the difficulties and differences in the implementation of the Program, but geography and cultural diversity are other factors influencing the realization of these rights in different locations. The different regions and provinces present a great variety of demographic and ethnic groups, natural resources, political, and cultural traditions and economic and social conditions. This diversity has resulted in uneven levels of implementation of the national program, as well as differing interpretations of the law. Despite these different realities, one success of the new laws has been the effective creation of a local program in all the provinces, with the reality that about 92% of the primary health centers in the country are currently providing sexual and reproductive services.(PNSSPR, 2010)

In terms of the institutional context, while the National program was initially created within the Area of Maternal and Child health, in 2006 became administrative and financially independent. The administrative separation from the original placement in the represented a rupture with traditional ideas of women as mothers, marking the shift from a biological approach to a health care policy based on sexual and (no)reproductive rights. With the new approach, and in compliance with the Millennium Development Goals, the central administration oriented its efforts to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health, and to strengthen a gender perspective as well as seeking to ensure the empowerment and autonomy of women.

Nonetheless, the public sector is far from being the only force influencing the implementation of the national or provincial policies on sexual and reproductive rights. In

the current and somewhat fragile democratization process, there are other powerful actors competing and arguing with the state about the meaning of rights and the authority to enforce them. Since its creation, the National Program of Sexual Health and Responsible Procreation have been challenged by conservative sectors, particularly fundamentalist Catholic groups. They have brought forward several lawsuits claiming that the Program is unconstitutional and requesting the discontinuation of the provision and distribution of the day-after pill, and other contraceptive methods.

Feminist groups from small and traditional communities have also spoken of the difficulties women face when trying to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights. In these small and conservative locations, patriarchal relationships and practices reinforce a culture that benefits favors over rights and consequently, access to contraceptive methods is based on personal relationships rather than on broad citizenship.⁹

However, the local implementation of the national legislation is also mediated by the different uses and interpretation of the meaning of sexual and reproductive rights.

The Medical Discourse and the health care system

The incorporation of human rights and women's rights discourse into the health care policies, particularly since the Cairo Plan of Action, represents a challenge to the traditional ideas of family and motherhood that have historically shaped the provision of sexual and reproductive health services in the country. The patriarchal nature of the medical system and its practices, along with the widely held idea of women as child bearers among the medical profession, have historically confined sexual and reproductive services to the provision of contraception, HIV/SIDA and maternity care. Practitioners in

⁹ This practice is known as "Clientelismo" which consist of a meaning to obtaining votes in exchange of favor which is a common practice among local politician and an expression of a patriarchal culture where someone with power gives something, or favor someone with less power.

the health care system still perceive sexuality and reproduction as being in the domain of “experts” rather than being an issue of people’s rights over their own bodies.

One particular area in which access to sexual and reproductive rights has proven to be difficult for women is the case of abortion and the treatment in post-abortion care.¹⁰. Experts estimated between 460,000 to 600,000 abortions occurred every year; a significant number of these are performed in unsafe conditions (Mario y Pantelides, 2009). The deaths resulting from illegal abortion represent one third of all the total deaths related to pregnancy and labor and this has been one of the leading cases of maternal deaths for decades. The committee of CEDAW as well as other Human Rights committees, have expressed their concerns in their recommendations (CEDAW, 2010), and this situation has also been extensively reported by women’s and human rights groups on shadow reports and other documents. (CLADEM, 2010)

Legal discourse and the judicial system

Legal norms are mediated by procedures, lawyers, judges as well as the rules of formation of legal discourse interwoven with other patriarchal discourses (Hecht Schafran, 1995). Since the restoration of democracy, and partly due to the fragility of political institutions, the judiciary has become a field where the different interpretations of sexual and reproductive rights are under dispute and often contested. Voluntary termination of pregnancy, surgical contraception, and the sexual rights of adolescents are frequently brought to court by actors who have conflicting interests. In these cases,

¹⁰ In Argentina, voluntary termination of pregnancy is illegal and is classified in the Penal Code as a crime against life. However, there are circumstances in which voluntary termination of pregnancy is permitted: when the health or the life of the woman is in danger, and when the child is the result of the rape of a mentally incapacitated woman

scientific, legal and religious discourses dispute the meaning and restrictions of sexual and reproductive rights.

The debate about emergency contraception is a good illustration of the conflicting interpretations about sexual and reproductive rights. While published scientific evidence clearly indicates that the emergency contraception interferes with sperm migration, thereby preventing fertilization, there is a belief, based on medical information prior to the year 2000, that the pill could also impede the implantation of a fertilized egg. This argument brings up the debate about the beginning of life, which, according to medical discourse, is after the egg is implanted. Religious groups affirm on the other hand, that life exists from the moment of conception. Another matter of legal dispute among the medical community is whether or not the confidentiality of the doctor-patient relationship is overridden by the obligation to inform the authorities of an alleged or suspected crime, such as an abortion under Argentine legislation.

Women's groups and users also make use of the judicial system to claim their sexual and reproductive rights. In this case, the access to justice is hampered by cultural, symbolic and material constraints as well as the lack of trust in the judiciary which is spread among Argentinean men and women.¹¹ Nevertheless, the democratic transition did provide some opportunities to improve the quality of state institutions, such as the renewal of the Supreme Court, and the appointment of two female judges in 2004.¹²

¹¹ The complicit role played by the judiciary in the violation of human rights perpetrated by the military regime and the extended corruption has influenced its practices and how the system is perceived by public opinion. A survey conducted by the NGO Latinbarometro to evaluate the grade of democracy in the region, showed that only 10 per cent of the Argentine population believes in the existence of equal access to justice, approximately 18 per cent consider that public institutions are working efficiently, and less than 50 per cent trust in the ability of the State to enforce the law. Latinbarometro. Annual Report 2007 and 2008. Retrieve December 16, 2009 <http://www.latinobarometro.org/Latinbarometro>.

¹² As part of this move to renew public institutions, and for the first time in Argentine history, two women candidates were nominated to fill vacant posts in the Supreme Court. The fact that the first appointee, Dr. Carmen Argibay, serving at that time as a judge at the Hague Court of Human Rights, had declared to the press that she was a feminist,

As for women trying to use the judiciary to demand recognition for their rights, the complexity of the system and the lack of information about the administrative mechanisms involved, operate as a barrier to accessing justice (Bergallo, 2009). Some feminist organizations such as CLADEM (The Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights) have regularly used the national and international system of protection of rights to advocate and secure women's rights. On the other hand, religious groups with enough resources have often used the national judiciary system to limit the expansion of sexual and reproductive rights.

In spite of the different uses of the legal norms and systems, many feminist activists agree with Kristen Hastrup when she affirms that *"legal language is a creative speech that produces existence of that of which it speaks"* (Hastrup, xxxx), and for some feminist activists, as Susana Chiarotti, this is precisely where the trouble lies.¹³

The feminist discourse and the women's movement

The Argentinean women's movement constitutes a national expression, with particular characteristics, of a larger and heterogeneous regional movement that comprises a multiplicity of feminist and non-feminist groups with different opinions and perspectives. Since the 1980s, as part of the recovery process of the democratic system, many women and feminist groups became organized around NGOS to counterbalance the fragility of political institutions, and as a means to access financial resources from the

atheist, and advocated for the decriminalization of abortion, unleashed a public discussion usually restricted to the boundaries of the feminist movement and the conservative Catholic church

¹³ Susana Chiarotti argues that one of the challenges for the effective exercise of sexual and reproductive rights is the lack of women's voices and participation in "making the law". This absence of female participation creates a discourse that is predominantly masculine and patriarchal, which excludes women's needs and experiences. She also points to the fact that males constitute a majority within the domestic, international, and inter-American system of human rights protection, and consequently, that the norms and instruments established by these entities to promote and protect human rights fail to explicitly recognize women's distinct needs and gender differences. The inequalities resulting from the male-oriented view of human rights lead Susana Chiarotti to believe that such laws won't work: . Susana Chiarotti, personal communication

international organizations promoting the strengthening of the incipient democracies in the region. (Sonia Alvarez, 1999) The 1980s and 1990s were also a period of a great development in gender theory and the creation of departments of gender studies in universities.

The Argentinean women's and feminist movements have proven to be effective in the enactment of legislation for the advancements of women's rights, and also in preventing the implementation of restrictive measures such as the attempt to introduce an article to protect life from the moment of conception in the reform of the constitution in 1994. In addition to lobby for the incorporation of women rights into national and local legislation, other significant initiatives promoted by the women movement are the creation of the Observatory of Health, Gender and Human Rights, two ongoing campaigns for the convention on sexual and health rights and, for legal, safe, and affordable abortion, the implementation of the Hotline "Abortion: more information, less risk", and the National Consortium for Sexual and Reproductive Health.

The combination of the different strategies implemented by the women's movement to secure women's rights have had an impact on public opinion and have influenced the knowledge that non-organized women have about their sexual and reproductive rights. In spite the progress on the legitimating and legalization of sexual and reproductive rights accomplished in the last 25 years of democracy, the persistence of the patriarchal practices underpinning the judicial and medical system remain a significant barrier to women's justice. The language of women's rights and non-discrimination incorporated into national legislation has not been fully translated into the

actual experience of a large number of women, particularly those living in conditions of extreme vulnerability.

IV Conclusion: Challenges and opportunities of the democratization process

The end of the dictatorship and the democratic transition created the conditions for women activists to re-orient their actions aimed at the incorporation of gender issues into the political agenda, along with the expansion of democracy. In their efforts to secure gender justice, women's and feminist groups mobilized transnational networks accumulating substantial experience and legitimizing their voices as a key factor in the political arena. Within the national boundaries, the movement oriented their actions to translate international non-discriminatory norms to the local level, incorporating them into national legislation. The entrenchment of international human rights treaties in the constitution, and the increase of feminine representation on the congress following the quota law, has proved to be critical in achieving the massive transformation of national legislation that has taken place in the last 20 years. The examination of the processes leading to these changes demonstrates the critical role played by women and feminist organizations, and unveils the power struggles and alliances between the numerous actors. At this juncture in its history, and 25 years after the restoration of the democratic system, Argentina has one of the most advanced legislative structures in the region and it is hard to find any discriminatory measure in its discourse. But the realization of women's rights has not been as effective, encountering numerous limitations.

In the historical context described, the construction of new interpretative frameworks about sexual and reproductive rights cannot be disembodied from the social actors forming a part of the context, and of the process of negotiation and redistribution

of power and resources. Local women's and feminist groups enriched by the exchanges with the global women's movement, have expanded and multiply their constituencies bringing new, marginalized voices to the public domain. They have also opened a debate about human rights that includes issues pertaining to citizenship and democracy. In other words, the women's movement appropriated and re-created international legal instruments, integrating into its discourse the private-sexual body distinction, opening up sexuality as a new territory for the exercise of rights. Seyla Benhabib (2006) defines this development as "democratic iteration", a complex process of public argument, deliberation and exchange through which international norms are contested and contextualized. In the case of Argentina, this process of iteration has had twofold ramifications: 1) the appropriation of the universal of rights by the women's movement has permitted women to re-conceptualize the abstract and andocentric notion of "human" into a sexually diverse body and its desire; and 2) the localization of the international human rights framework also expresses the aspirations and ability of new political actors to transform the existing social and patriarchal order.

These processes of construction of new and participatory citizenships and inclusive democratic practices entail a contestation to hegemonic globalization, to paraphrase Boaventura de Sousa Santos: the collective construction of all alternative legality from below. De Sousa Santos and Rodriguez Garavito (2005) developed the idea of a "*subaltern cosmopolitan legality*" to describe the experience of grassroots resistance and contestation to the international legal norms as a top-down process that could be applied to the experience of the women's movement in Argentina. The Argentine experience also illustrates that the letter of the law without the actual experience in the

tangible body, has neither representation nor meaning. Because the end of discrimination against women demands not only the inclusion of them as the subject of rights but means a profound transformation of democratic societies. It includes a new definition of public and private, the redistribution of political power, and new medical and legal discourses and knowledge about the body.

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